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SUBJECT: PRT BASRA'S EID AL-FITR CELEBRATION A SYMBOLIC MILESTONE

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¶1. This is a Basra PRT reporting cable.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Basra PRT hosted an Eid al-Fitr (end of Ramadan) event on September 23 for an estimated 130 guests from a broad swath of Basra society. The event took place at a new downtown Basra luxury hotel, significant itself, as it further demonstrated the growing "normalcy" of the city. It was the first USG-hosted event in Basra outside of a fortified USG structure since the 1967 closing of the Basra consulate. In his welcoming remarks, Basra Team Leader noted that the U.S. military presence and large scale reconstruction assistance will continue to wind down, while a civilian diplomatic and development assistance presence would persist. Perhaps the most significant theme of the night was the number of high-profile Basrawis openly mingling with USG officials in a gleaming new downtown hotel. This Eid celebration was a significant signpost and an event that would have been unthinkable even one year ago.

End Summary.

Honoring Eid al-Fitr

¶3. (SBU) To honor the end of the Ramadan season, PRT Basra invited contacts from provincial politics, media, business, religion (including minority Christians and Sunnis), feminists, NGOs, military, and police to a traditional dinner at a newly completed hotel in downtown Basra. The celebration's featured guest was Member of Parliament Sayyid Ayyad Jamal al-Deen (former INL, currently with the Independent Shi'a group). Three dozen USG officials from the PRT, 34th Infantry Division (ID), and 17th Fires Brigade also attended. To the best of the PRT's knowledge, this is the first USG-hosted event outside of any USG structure since the 1967 closing of the U.S. consulate in Basra in the wake of the Six Day War and Iraq's breaking of diplomatic relations.

Auspicious venue

¶4. (SBU) The venue was the brand new, \$15 million "Mnawi Basha," a 120-room, "five star" (by Iraqi standards) hotel. The PRT hosting this event at this central downtown location, away from the apparent safety of our campus (eight miles west of Basra), was notable. For many locals, the hotel is a hopeful symbol of a new and better Basra. Local contacts had been urging us for the past two years to host any such high-profile events inside the city. Several guests praised PRTOffs for hosting the event at the hotel noting that it further demonstrated the "normalcy" of their city. Coordinated security was provided by the 34th ID and Iraqi Security Forces. The hotel owners told the PRT that they have already seen a marked increase in occupancy rates, including from European, British, and some U.S. businesspeople.

High turnout, VIP faces in the crowd

15. (SBU) A high percentage - about 130 of 170 - of invited guests attended the Eid dinner, including Governor Shiltagh (Da'wa Islamiya), several Provincial Council members, Directors General (DG) and deputy DGs of several key agencies, and Muslim and Christian leaders. The high attendance rate also reflects well on PRT relations with the governor, given that many of them require the governor's permission to make even the most minor decision, including attendance events such as this. More importantly, guests expressed no apparent reluctance to be seen with members of the PRT. While the high turnout was partly attributable to the usual group of contacts attending, including those eager for PRT money for pet projects, a lot of other guests showed up as well.

Team Leader remarks

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16. (SBU) In his welcoming remarks, Basra Team Leader honored Basrawis on the end of the Ramadan season. He also took the opportunity to stress again that the large U.S. military presence - and large scale reconstruction assistance - will - continue winding down. At the same time, he noted that an enduring civilian diplomatic and development assistance presence would continue, representing a more stable and "normal" bilateral relationship.

Iraqis also getting better acquainted with themselves

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17. The event was an opportunity to bring disparate groups of Basrawis together. While many of this diverse crowd appeared to interact well - Christians talking to Muslims, Shi'as with Sunnis, media with security forces, all in the heartland of Iraqi Shi'ism - several guests found themselves spending time with people with whom they would not normally. One group of

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guests who found themselves at the same table included a visually impaired director of an NGO assisting visually impaired citizens, two prominent journalists, and the Basra Province commanding general. The journalists and general later separately thanked the PRT for having invited and recognized the NGO director, that it had been an honor to be with him, and it was a reminder for Iraqis to focus on and appreciate more its own disabled citizens.

Comment: An encouraging signpost

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18. (SBU) Occasionally, in the long, two-step-forward, one-step-back challenge that is the USG presence in Iraq, we experience a truly encouraging signpost along the way. This event was one of them. While the occasion will be followed by many challenges, it is important to take note of the fact that an open, public, USG-sponsored affair in the heart of Basra would have been unthinkable even one year ago. The event also appeared to discredit the thought that Basrawis do not want to be seen with the PRT, or in some instances, with each other. The PRT's guests appreciated this gesture to reach out and honor them on one of their most sacred and festive holidays. While PRT Basra members engage their contacts off of the FOB consistently, the more Basrawis see us and get to know the PRT specifically and Americans generally, the less fear and misunderstanding there is. NALAND